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The Cheating on the PL5

Just as President Reagan is trying to warm up relations with the Kremlin, he must decide what to do about the third Soviet test of a new long-range missile, secretly described by Central Intelligence Agency and Air Force analysts as more than twice the size allowed by the SALT II treaty.

The CIA has sent its analysts back to restudy their data before sending it on to the White House, putting a "hold" on one of today's most important government secrets. But there is little doubt about validity. Administration officials were shocked by the clearest evidence so far of Soviet missile cheating. Thus, Reagan must decide whether to publicly accuse the Soviets of SALT II violations even though he may not consider the time ripe for confrontation.

That's because the president is trying to moderate his Cold War rhetoric and shed the Genghis Khan cloak, bestowed on him by Democrats, in time for the 1984 election. But Reagan's staunchest supporters in Congress, who have been dismayed by his past reluctance to confront Moscow on SALT II violations, will demand that he face up to the damning evidence once it reaches the Oval Office.

The Soviet missile, designated the PL5, underwent its third test May 30. This was the first test the United States was able to scrutinize by special radar screens operated from an electronic ship, well-known to the Russians, stationed in the Bering Sea off the coast of Siberia.

Normally, radar readings are not nearly so informative as telemetry readings from the missile during its flight, but the PL5's telemetry was heavily encrypted. Radar scrutiny did reveal this central fact: the throw-weight (payload) of the PL5 appears slightly more than 200 percent of the throw-weight of the old SS13.

The significance of that ratio derives from the fact that SALT II, which Moscow and Washington have agreed to obey even though it never was ratified, permits only one "new type" missile each for the two superpowers. The Kremlin has conducted four tests on what the United States regards as the one permissible "new type" Soviet missile, designated the SSX24. Thus, the PL5 cannot be a legal "new type" missile.

But SALT says the throw-weight of a modernized or "follow-on" missile cannot exceed the original by more than 5 percent. Yet, the Soviets have informed the United States that the PL5 is a "follow-on" of the SS13, not a "new type" missile. Clearly, then, if Air Force and CIA analysts are even close to being right in estimating a 200 percent increase in throw-weight, the PL5 is a "new type" missile, not a modernized SS13. Summed up, the radar ship caught the Kremlin cheating red-handed.

When the CIA and Air Force intelligence first received radar data from the May 30 test, they sent it routinely to the Foreign Technology Division of Air Force Intelligence and to the government's Lincoln labs in Cambridge, Mass. Examination of the data in both laboratories produced substantial agreement on throw-weight. These findings were returned to the CIA and the Air Force.

Air Force intelligence officers argued for immediately sending the alarming report on the PL5 to the White House, State Department, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and Department of Energy. But CIA officials worried about implications of so wide a dissemination. Despite months of White House hints about going to the mat with the Russians on alleged SALT violations, Reagan always has decided that evidence of cheating has fallen short and pulled back at the last moment from charging a violation.

The CIA finally decided it did not want the heavy responsibility of sending the president what looked to be irrefutable evidence of cheating, boxing him in a corner. Once he received the evidence, Reagan would have no exit from a major confrontation with Yuri Andropov at a time he might not want it.

Accordingly, the CIA ordered the data sent back to the labs for more study. It also ordered major efforts to break the encryption code of the missile's telemetry—in itself a probable violation of SALT II—to learn the PL5's secrets from its own reports back to Soviet stations.

But that can only delay the decision for Ronald Reagan. Both his political advisers and the State Department, taking different routes, have arrived at the same destination: agreement that now is the time for some U.S.-Soviet reconciliation, specifically a new arms control agreement. Just at this point, ironically, the president soon will have on his desk evidence of Soviet cheating so blatant that it could produce an outcry menacing even U.S. adherence to SALT II.